

The Need for an IBCT (COIN)

Maintaining Focus on an Almost Forgotten Mission

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“Contrary to popular belief, the military history of the United States is one characterized by stability operations, interrupted by distinct episodes of major combat.”

— Field Manual (FM) 3-07, *Stability Operations*¹

The Army must maintain a focus on counterinsurgency (COIN) and stability operations. Lately, the Army is refocusing its training efforts on combat against a near peer — with particular attention given to armored and Stryker brigade combat teams (ABCTs/SBCTs). This shift brings about a virtual purge of COIN lessons as leaders scramble to be among the vanguard in the focus against the reformed old threats: Russia, North Korea, and other aggressive nation-states. Even as the Army was bogged down in a COIN campaign in Iraq and counterterror/insurgency operations in Afghanistan (and while still conducting stability operations around the world), the Army seems to have been intent on getting away from COIN and stability operations. In professional discussions amongst ourselves, we’ve heard that Field Artillery is not as good as it was before the wars, that our maneuver capability has suffered because of the focus on COIN, and that units have not experienced the big fights of Cold War-era National Training Center (NTC) rotations. We’ve got to get back to basics, many say. This attitude from leaders echoes in the hearts of many of our officers and NCOs who grew up during the last 16 years of the COIN fight, many of whom fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and have memories of successes, failures, and absolute failures.

The purpose of this article is not to counter those marching orders to train to fight a more traditional nation-state but to offer a differing perspective and possible solutions to maintaining and bettering our tactics and techniques to operate against insurgency in an unstable environment. While the Army refocuses the majority of our combat power on training to fight near-peer adversaries, we must concurrently build upon our collective knowledge of COIN operations by concentrating certain units on COIN training. Now is the time to emphasize COIN — to

think, theorize, rehearse, train, and rethink COIN. Now is the time to develop experts in COIN warfare — before the next insurgency fight.

COIN tactics grew popular in the Army and the American public for a short time with GEN David Petraeus as its chief proponent and including many intellectuals and authors like H.R. McMaster, David Kilcullen, and John Nagl to name a few. Still, while COIN became a catch phrase, set of instructions, and additional readings, it could never overcome the prestige of force-on-force training. Many leaders simply didn’t believe in it. COIN doesn’t produce a Grant, a Patton, or a Schwarzkopf. COIN strategy is anticlimactic, unlike the preferred “American way of war” in which overwhelming manpower and resources are applied in full to destroy an enemy’s forces and economy, leading to unconditional surrender.²

COIN doctrine pushed protection of the population over protection of yourself. To be successful in COIN, one must be unselfish, and in many ways, more daring. It is certainly riskier, and risk is something our modern military may be reluctant to accept.



Photos by Patrick Ponder

The author, CPT Ryan Hovatter, meets with village leaders during training at Fort Bliss, TX, in August 2015. At the time, CPT Hovatter was serving as commander of B Company, 2nd Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Florida National Guard, which was preparing for an upcoming deployment to Djibouti.

Perhaps some of the best American practitioners of COIN prior to the recent war on terrorism can be seen in the U.S. Marine Corps' combined action platoon (CAP) concept from the Vietnam War, where a squad of eight to 16 Marines lived, trained, and fought with a platoon of about 40 Vietnamese. They didn't live on large bases with protective walls and checkpoints; they lived on small outposts nestled within or on the outskirts of villages. The Vietnamese soldiers in the CAP were from the area and knew it well. They had the highest stake in the game, being villagers themselves. Success was based on mutual trust amongst the Marines, Vietnamese soldiers, and the village population. The Marines had to sacrifice protection measures, an often unpopular choice with commanders and the American public. Eventually the village would shut off resources, supplies, and recruits to the Viet Cong, which could not survive without this support. It's said that the best defense is an offense. Well, in COIN the offense is engagement with the population. By building trusting relationships and knowing the terrain, the CAP created more safety and stability than any HESCO barriers could. More importantly, it worked toward accomplishing a strategy of ending insurgency. The Marines were not passive. They patrolled at night and established ambushes. It wasn't easy back then either. It was dangerous and there were setbacks in villages, but on the whole, the program was succeeding. The tragedy of the Marine CAP program is that it was never bought on the whole across Vietnam. GEN William Westmoreland regarded the strategy as ineffective and wrote in his 1976 autobiography that to put a squad in every village would have been fragmenting resources and exposing them to defeat in detail.³ Even his special assistant for COIN (later General) William DePuy had little faith in the Marine CAPs or in any American forces conducting COIN, writing that American forces "didn't know how to do COIN very well" and that America's main problem in the war was that "we didn't stick to fighting the enemy's main force."⁴

In all of my Army officer training, I have never trained on anything close to what the Marine CAPs practiced. My COIN training was always based out of a base camp conducting patrols, key leader engagements, convoys, raids, and cordon and searches. The training never allowed small units to live among a population, partially because there were never enough dedicated role players but also because it wasn't acceptable to do so. COIN training should be as intense as the training of the Combat Training Centers (CTCs) but with scenarios that provide more opportunities to focus on population control, emphasizing culture and language, balancing offensive, defensive, and stability operations in the same area, and "conducting armed social work."⁵ Even the writers of FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, noted a previous lack of training, writing in the preface that:

"Achieving this balance is not easy. It requires leaders at all levels to adjust their approach constantly. They must ensure that their Soldiers and Marines are ready to be greeted with either a handshake or a hand grenade while taking on missions only infrequently practiced until recently at our combat training centers."

The term "hearts and minds" is further misunderstood. It's not about making the population love you and feel good that you're there protecting them... To win their hearts and minds is to get them to believe that they are more secure under the COIN forces, that security will be in place for the long run, and that the population can rest assured that basic human needs will be met.

The need for designated COIN forces is illustrated by the many detractors and misunderstandings of COIN. Some of the negative attributes of COIN are that it is too prescriptive, static, and about people's feelings — none of which are true, much less effective in COIN. COL Harry Tunnell, commander of 5/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team during its 2009-2010 Afghanistan deployment, wrote that "COIN has become such a restrictive dogma that it cannot be questioned."⁶ Critics like retired COL Gian Gentile have lamented that military thinkers were obsessed with COIN tactics, and that new officers were told they needed to be better at building trusting relationships with communities. Gentile argued this was at a cost to training new leaders in their basic branch skills, and that the military needed to focus on combined arms competencies.⁷ The problem with his argument, made just after the Iraq drawdown, is that the U.S. military didn't struggle fighting the fifth most powerful army in the world in 1991.⁸ The U.S. military didn't struggle toppling Iraq's army again in 2003, which was still arguably the most powerful military in the Middle East.⁹ What the U.S. military struggled with was the aftermath of toppled regimes and dysfunctional governments in Iraq and Afghanistan — we struggled with COIN.

These sentiments may be shared by many as we turn back to the basics of force-on-force fighting. The term "hearts and minds" is further misunderstood. It's not about making the population love you and feel good that you're there protecting them. Hearts and minds is about making people believe that their safety is your priority. To win their hearts and minds is to get them to believe that they are more secure under the COIN forces, that security will be in place for the long run, and that the population can rest assured that basic human needs will be met. It is to convince the population that their government is legal and legit — that their government will not collapse. You've won their minds when you convince them of this. You win their hearts when they turn in the insurgents, when they put their lives at risk by offering information and aid to security forces. The war to win hearts and minds is still war, but there comes a time when there is less shooting, less killing. Kilcullen describes hearts and minds as building trusted networks:

"This is the true meaning of the phrase 'hearts and minds,' which comprises of two separate components.

*'Hearts' means persuading people their best interests are served by your success; 'minds' means convincing them that you can protect them, and that resisting you is pointless. Note that neither concept has to do with whether people like you.'*¹⁰

The Army must foster a COIN community, one in which COIN tactics and operations can continue to be advanced. Even when nested within a higher strategic vision, units have a hard time changing their culture. BCTs preparing for a rotation at NTC to fight the Krasnovians have naturally developed an aggressive attack-focused mindset. How does this BCT shift focus from attack and defend to COIN? Imagine a commander's guidance, "Anytime you fight — anytime you fight — you always kill the other son of a b—! You are the hunter, the predator; you are looking for the prey." This real standing order came from COL Michael Steele while his brigade was assigned to conduct COIN in Iraq in 2006.¹¹ Perhaps these mantras are needed to hype up an invasion force, to give Soldiers a will to win, something to overcome fear, but this attitude is the exact opposite of the thinking needed in a COIN fight or stability operations. It cannot be overstated that COIN still requires offensive action and destroying an enemy will sometimes be an operational objective, but killing the enemy is never the strategic objective. COIN operations should be environment-centric or population-centric — not focused on the enemy. If the Army does not develop units with a COIN mindset, it will rarely find one when it's needed.

The Army's newly announced security force assistance brigades (SFABs) could prove to be a valuable asset in getting the Army in the right mindset that insurgencies cannot be ignored. While these units will provide an invaluable necessity to COIN, they may find difficulty in bridging the gap between initial response and fostering sustainable security. Advise and assist units are needed in conjunction with infantry battalions on the ground. In failed states, there may not be organized armies, police, or security forces to advise and assist. As seen in post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan, security forces took years to build or rebuild. American infantry units were needed on the ground immediately to fill the security vacuum and continued to be needed while local security forces were organized, trained, and fielded.

What's needed is a unit, not much different from the invasion forces of Infantry BCTs, ABCTs, and SBCTs, but one that has a different culture. One that can fight hard in offensive operations, but that is more focused on the aftermath of a crumbled regime, insurgency, or instability than the basic needs of populations. Organizational culture is the fundamental difference in these necessary units.



A Soldier from 2-124 IN listens to villagers during training at Fort Bliss in August 2015.

This role could go to some of the National Guard's 20 IBCTs. Guardsmen could even be considered more "qualified" for COIN and stability operations than Regular Army Soldiers because they are more attuned with civilian matters, since they still live in communities and the majority have jobs and careers throughout the array of civilian possibilities. This stands in contrast to Regular Army Soldiers who often live on bases, with their own infrastructure, segregated from civilian communities and often many miles from a city. While able to conduct the full spectrum of assigned operations, Guardsmen only bring their distinct skill sets to value in COIN and stability operations, where their diverse perspectives can help with innovative, often non-military, solutions.

Guardsmen also have a unique role in civil support operations in their states under control of their governors, often working for or with local governments and law enforcement. These unique Guard experiences and qualifications combined with Guard IBCTs' knowledge and training in direct action create a perfect baseline to build on a COIN focus and culture. Whether the COIN BCT is in the National Guard or Active component, it should be motorized infantry in nature. The culture would be similar to active component IBCTs but with far more focus on COIN and stability operations. COIN still takes an aggressive mindset, but a "kill the other son of a b—" maxim will absolutely not work in these types of missions.

Shifting the Guard's IBCT focus more toward stability operations and COIN, also makes sense in that it takes most

Guard units more time to mobilize and deploy than their active counterparts. By the time most Guard units got into Iraq, the big tank war was over and the long difficult road of stability operations had begun, where uncertainty, lawlessness, and a power vacuum descended into intense insurgency and eventually into civil war.

The COIN BCT modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) would have to change. Artillery is important but should be reorganized to better meet COIN-specific needs. More intelligence support, even down to the company level, should be added. Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) units should align with COIN BCTs and fall under the same training/availability cycle. These COIN BCTs should have a large civil-military cell in the brigade headquarters with specialists in city management, power, sewage, water, and trash. This cell should be led by a senior field grade officer in order to give weight to the civil nature of the brigade. This may be achieved by attaching a civil affairs company to the BCT. In order to have well-informed, culturally astute leaders, as the COIN field manual states as a goal, the COIN BCT would focus attention on cultural and language training, perhaps even creating and using additional skill identifiers to manage personnel. These could be in addition to normal IBCT requirements, but in no difference to airborne IBCTs requiring additional schools such as airborne and master parachutist.

Some will say that training for COIN should merely remain a task of the BCTs. While it should remain part of the standardized mission essential tasks (MET) of all BCTs, many units will take the risk of not training COIN/stability operations while focusing on other areas. Just as an infantry company has under its standard MET area reconnaissance and screen, they often do not focus on these missions. In this respect, a COIN-focused task organization is no different than a reconnaissance-focused cavalry squadron made of up of infantry and armor personnel. In that same regard, a COIN BCT is little different from a BCT focused on airborne, air assault, or mountain operations. Each of those BCTs have slight differences in MTOE but major differences in culture that give them an edge in certain environments.

The differences in MTOE would only enable the COIN BCT to better perform its mission, but the key difference is in its approach. While it is not difficult to change mentality among capable leaders, it is difficult to change an organizational culture. For example, it is difficult to change a unit's approach from concentration to dispersion or fragmentation of forces. Dispersion is essential in COIN, yet higher commands historically object to this since it is at odds with one of the principles of war: mass. GEN Westmoreland thought the Marines' approach to CAP was foolish and preferred battalion and larger Army attacks. David Galula, the well-known COIN theorist and practitioner, faced a similar criticism from his command when he dispersed his company into detachments of 15-20 Soldiers and stationed them in Algerian villages that had been pacified.¹²

As the Army shifts its focus away from COIN, much as the

post-Vietnam Army did, the knowledge we've learned and haven't learned will be lost. Already the newest crop of Army captains have spent their last four years in an Army that by and large wants to forget Iraq and Afghanistan. Deploying as a combat arms officer to a stability operation is far less prestigious than having CTC rotations under one's belt. If we lose COIN focus, there could be another 20-25 years before we dust off the old FM and frantically update it while already overwhelmed in fighting an insurgency, as the Army and Marine Corps did in 2006 at the height of violence in Iraq. Despite our wishes, COIN and stability operations are and will continue to be the predominant missions.

Notes

¹ FM 3-07, *Stability Operations* (6 October 2008), 1-1.

² Russell F. Weigley, "How Americans Wage War: The Evolution of National Strategy" in *Major Problems in American Military History*, John Whiteclay Chambers II and G. Kurt Pielher (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 2-6.

³ William Childs Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 166.

⁴ William E. DePuy, "Excerpt from An Oral History of Americans in Vietnam, 1945-1975" from *Selected Papers of General William E. Depuy*, compiled by COL Richard M. Swain (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1994), 439-440.

⁵ David Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency," Edition 1 (Washington, D.C., March 2006), 8.

⁶ COL Harry D. Tunnell IV, "Open Door Policy — Report from a Tactical Commander," letter to John McHugh, Secretary of the Army, Department of the Army, Headquarters 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, 20 August 2010.

⁷ Gian P. Gentile, "The Death of the Armor Corps," *Small Wars Journal*, 2010; Gian P. Gentile, "COIN is Dead: U.S. Army Must Put Strategy Over Tactics," *Small Wars Journal*, 22 November 2011.

⁸ John M. Broder and Douglas Jehl, "Iraqi Army: World's 5th Largest but Full of Vital Weaknesses," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 August 1990.

⁹ Sharon Otterman, "Iraq: Iraq's Prewar Military Capabilities," Council on Foreign Relations, modified 3 February 2005. Assessed on 22 May 2017 from <https://www.cfr.org/background/iraq-iraqs-prewar-military-capabilities>.

¹⁰ Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles," 5.

¹¹ Greg Jaffe and David Cloud, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army* (NY: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 225.

¹² David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria: 1956-1958* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2006).

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